

# Realizing Your Extraordinary Future Through Executive Coaching

*Lois M. Harper*

By definition, the future can be a rather abstract term. While viewed as an indefinite time after the present, its arrival is inevitable. In fact, acquisition leaders in the Department of Defense (DoD) know firsthand how much their success depends on the future and plan ahead, accordingly. However, do they really think far enough forward and can they imagine thinking beyond their own possibilities? In the face of what seem to be overwhelming constraints, it is very easy to default to short-term thinking when “the predictable” includes reductions in funding, technology obstacles, and changes in user requirements.

To help extend DoD’s acquisition leader’s thinking well beyond next week’s incoming dilemma, the Defense Acquisition University (DAU) invested in two coaching initiatives designed to move performance beyond the predictable—executive coaching and leader as coach. Through its powerful questioning methodology, coaching artfully guides leaders on a journey of self-discovery, centered on a model that breaks thinking barriers and can lead to an extraordinary future. Both coaching initiatives have proven to be effective ways in achieving promising results while developing strong leadership attributes in the recipients.

Executive coaching, the first initiative, allows senior-level acquisition professionals in key leadership positions to enlist a DAU executive coach for 9 to 12 months. Since 2009, DAU has been actively working one-on-one with these high

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>OCT 2013</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2013 to 00-00-2013</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Realizing Your Extraordinary Future Through Executive Coaching</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Defense Acquisition University, Defense AT&amp;L, 9820 Belvoir Road, Fort Belvoir, VA, 22060-5565</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>4</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

performers to help them realize an extraordinary future for themselves and the organizations they lead. Executive coaching provides a “strategic confidant” where the leaders candidly discuss and explore challenges that confront them, and devise the required actions that create a pathway for greater leadership success. The candidates primarily are program managers (PMs), program directors, and program executive officers (PEOs) at the GS-15/O-6 and higher level.

The second initiative enables mid-level supervisors and team leaders to obtain additional skills for their leadership toolbox through ACQ 453, a customized classroom course centered on “Leader as Coach.” ACQ 453 focuses on shifting supervisor and team lead thinking, behaviors, skills and strategies. The leaders learn the virtues of encouraging and rewarding self-discovery and accountability. The course uses many of the same principles and behaviors of executive coaching. It serves as a catalyst that creates energy within the individual to innovate and grow professionally—lighting a fire within individuals instead of lighting a fire under them. Class participants learn coaching skills by developing their own extraordinary future and practicing coaching skills on each other. Unlike the one-on-one relationship seen in executive coaching, ACQ 453 participants look for opportunities to “wear the coaching hat” in their various roles as director, mentor, teacher, and counselor. Participants are encouraged to challenge their bosses by saying to them, “Don’t give me the answer; ask me a question.”

Extraordinary futures can take on various forms. To some acquisition professionals, it means turning a historically “red” or “yellow” program rating to “green.” To others, it translates into developing and implementing more efficient business practices, such as those recently reinforced in the Under Secretary for Defense of Acquisition, Technology and Logistics’ Better Buying Power (BBP) initiatives. It could also be a pivotal leadership action that finally unifies an organization’s internal and external stakeholders where previous attempts failed. In all cases, the extraordinary future is in both the eyes and hands of the beholder.

So, what evidence confirms that coaching is effective, in particular executive coaching? I invited Air Force Col. Clarence Johnson, and Navy CAPT Joe Beel, two previous coaching clients, to join me in a virtual roundtable dialogue about their coaching experiences. I was curious to learn their initial perception of coaching, their opinion on the coaching model, what coaching did for them and their organization, and if they would recommend coaching as an effective tool for others.

During his coaching engagement, Johnson led the Nuclear Capabilities Directorate, charged with providing nuclear deterrence enabling and warfighting capabilities to Force Providers and Combatant Commanders. The Directorate was responsible for an exceptionally diverse mission including education, surety, sustainment, and life extension of the Air Force custody nuclear weapons, weapon systems and



support equipment. Within weeks of becoming the director, he said he “experienced a stroke of good fortune.” His Commander and PEO for Strategic Systems co-sponsored a DAU leadership event that brought him into contact with members of the DAU executive coaching program. His PEO encouraged him to connect with DAU and seek out a coach. Johnson said, “I must admit, when I first received this encouragement, I was a bit taken aback. Never before in my previous command postings had I been encouraged to seek out leadership partnering or coaching. So, as you might imagine, I went into this less than enthusiastically.” He also questioned whether it was wise for him to volunteer for the opportunity since it might infer a lack of confidence in his own leadership abilities. Johnson recalled his first conversation with me. “You talked me through what coaching was, but more importantly, what it wasn’t. You also anticipated my apprehension and moved quickly to give me a sense for the caliber of military leaders that have participated in the program. What stood out during our conversation was the fact coaching isn’t designed to fix leaders that are broken, but rather take successful leaders and teams to the next level. Boy, was I relieved. I could see then that my PEO’s encouragement was not a sign of his lack of confidence in our leadership team, but rather an endorsement of our potential, and a desire to see us achieve even more than we thought was possible.”

Today, we have potential coaching clients coming to us and asking to be coached. At the beginning of the program, there



DAU's Lois Harper in coaching mode with Navy CAPT Joe Beel. Commanding Officer, Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center, Pacific.

was a great uneasiness whenever people were asked if they want to be coached. I queried Beel and discovered he felt the same way. As one of DAU's first coaching clients, Beel was the Deputy Program Manager at the time for the Tactical Networks Program Office, PEO Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence (C4I). His responsibilities centered on an innovative approach to providing the Navy with breakthrough tactical network capabilities for the future. According to Beel, "I didn't really know what to expect when I signed on for coaching. I had recently completed PMT 401 and was asked about being part of the DAU pilot for executive coaching. My initial thought was that coaching would focus primarily on individual development, but I kept an open mind. I soon learned that coaching really focused on an extraordinary future that involved the individual, their team and extraordinary results in a major business focus area."

Over the past 4 years, DAU has applied various coaching models for both executive coaching and Leader as Coach. Each model is centered on developing and achieving an extraordinary future—starting with this declaration and working backward to develop a strong foundation to carry the load. An extraordinary future "blueprint" serves as an effective tool for documenting the plan's breakthroughs, strategies, and catalytic actions. The coach and client also work through a process of relationship building, stakeholder evaluation, and assessing who the leader currently is and needs to be. Questioning techniques ensure the clients take

time to reflect and develop their own solutions. The coach functions as a thinking partner as opposed to the expert/consultant. All this is done in the context of driving toward an extraordinary future.

Although we used two different coaching models for Johnson and Beel, I asked if they found these models to be beneficial. Beel said he found the structure to be well defined yet flexible. "Without a defined process, it would be easy to bog down and not accomplish what is needed. The regular meetings also force you to focus thought on your extraordinary future and avoid focusing on the here and now. Regular meetings with my coach also offered a time to question routine and verbalize alternatives. The ability to brainstorm and verbalize potential actions and futures was very important." Johnson added, "The model was fairly sound and consistent with other leadership models I encountered. In my case, what made the model effective was timing of the engagement and the chemistry between me and my coach. We seemed to fall right in together and never looked back. While my coach didn't tell me what I should or shouldn't do, he did help me to assess the effectiveness of my actions. More importantly, he would ask me to explain how my planned actions helped me achieve the unit's strategy mapping goals and objectives, and ultimately, our extraordinary future."

Since the purpose of coaching Defense Acquisition Workforce members is to enable improved acquisition outcomes



by leveraging the individuals' skills and energy while developing their capability, I wanted to know how coaching made a difference to the clients' organizations and to them as leaders. What was the bottom-line result?

"Executive coaching was a tremendous aid to implementing my leadership strategy and to the establishment of a higher level of performance for our organization," stated Johnson. "What was missing from our strategy was a coalescing impetus that would supercharge our people and appeal to their superior skills, drive and determination. We needed a vision that would truly rally our organization and place us on a much higher performance curve than what we would have otherwise envisioned. The notion of an extraordinary future and how it differed from a predictable future was exactly what we needed. We started to challenge expectations of ourselves even more, and not just in our core mission areas, but in every aspect of our portfolio. For example, we weren't just content with implementing BBP initiatives. We required every single subordinate unit to identify BBP candidate initiatives and deliver on their targets."

Beel offered a similar perspective. "Executive coaching enabled my team and me to identify an overarching, unifying objective that defined a future which allowed us to drive alignment and purpose. As I went through development of our communications plan, a small group of key leaders were involved in carefully analyzing every single word and ensuring that it would carry the right meaning to stakeholders and our team. This effort ensured their buy-in and ownership of the extraordinary future and the breakthroughs and actions necessary to achieve it. This allowed me to get them to 'own it, love it, live it.' The extraordinary future has endured as the major focus for the program office, and they are on the door step of delivering that future which will greatly enhance war-fighting effectiveness."

At the end of the formal coaching engagement, DAU challenges these leaders to coach others, much like we train in ACQ 453. When I asked Beel about his continuing role as leader as coach, he said: "I ask better questions to key individuals to help identify actions necessary for their development. In one particular case, I asked an employee who was not a great fit for his current role what he thought he would be best at and would like to do. He offered up an alternative that I had not considered, and he was, in fact, superb in this new role."

Johnson recently sat in his office writing his Directorate's first-ever annual report to stakeholders. In the accomplishments section, he wrote:


"Six of six successful Air Launched Cruise Missile (ALCM) Flight Tests with service life extended weapons;" "exceeded our 8 percent Better Buying Power (BBP) and Efficiencies savings target by 4 percent;" "awarded Secure Transportable Maintenance System contract ahead of schedule and dispatched with a bid protest in record time;" "eclipsed our 8 percent energy

conservation target by nearly 2 percent and 2 months ahead of schedule, achieved first-ever zero deficiency "Outstanding" rating during a Higher Headquarters Compliance Inspection ..."

When I asked what this meant to him, he said: "As I continued to add more and more accomplishments to the document, I couldn't help but feel great pride in my people and what we accomplished together for our customers in under a year. I am absolutely pleased with my decision to pursue coaching and would recommend it to others. Not only would I recommend it, I have done so, and often. A few months ago, I was at a Team Kirtland Air Force Base breakfast with the other wing commanders and equivalent directors. We gather monthly to discuss challenges and opportunities and to share lessons learned with each other. At our last session, I described to my colleagues my experience with executive coaching and encouraged them to consider it, especially as they were working to set their strategic visions for their organizations. As I see it, it's not about more effectively managing acquisition programs; it's about being a more effective, disciplined, and visionary leader for our organizations. It is our responsibility. ... I would go as far as saying our people are depending upon us to have a vision, to be able to articulate it, and to work with them to implement it. Coaching made all of the difference in the world as I worked with my leaders to take us to another level in performance."

Beel echoed Johnson's sentiment and added, "I would recommend coaching to anyone who has a pressing and challenging business objective that is not a matter of routine or a foregone conclusion." In fact, Beel and I did not conclude our coaching relationship at the end of the formal engagement. As the current Commanding Officer of Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center Pacific, another opportunity to develop and execute an extraordinary future emerged. Beel has continued to push our current coaching program to new heights by asking DAU to coach both him and several Senior Executives as a team with an engagement scheduled to complete by the end of Fiscal Year 2013.

## Conclusion

As of the end of calendar year 2012, DAU had coached 120 acquisition leaders and conducted 22 ACQ-453 classes. Between the very favorable feedback from both initiatives, DAU seems to be right on track with these two initiatives. For the executive coaching recipients, it is safe to say that their next week's dilemma no longer is problematic. They stretched their mental models, reshaped their thinking, and resolved some of the more formidable personnel or processes obstacles that if left alone would have become next week's dilemma. By embracing the art of the possible and suspending some of their own natural instincts, DAU's clients were able to think differently about their impending future and realize extraordinary results for themselves and the organizations they led. 

*The author would like to thank CAPT Joseph Beel, Col. Clarence Johnson, Rob Tremaine, and Don Goddard for their contributions to this article. The author can be contacted at [lois.harper@dau.mil](mailto:lois.harper@dau.mil).*